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IN THREE weeks' time, 600 gypsies will be evicted from the largest illegal traveller site in Europe.

The banished travellers at Dale Farm, in Crays Hill, will need somewhere to park their caravans, and rural communities across Essex are bracing themselves for an influx of gypsies.



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TRADITIONAL HOME: A gypsy at the gathering in Main Road, Woodham Walter

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CMAP20110725H-036_C.jpg Gypsy gathering, Main Road, Woodham Walter

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PLEA FOR SITES: Grattan Puxon

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SOON TO BE EMPTIED: The illegal traveller site at Dale Farm CMAP20110809G-015_X.jpg

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Worried rural communities in Essex have focused on the events in Woodham Ferrers in the past fortnight, where a farmer in the village – which has a population of 414 – allowed 5,000 gypsies to have a week-long religious festival on his field while he went on a cruise.

The tiny village could not cope, and villagers complained about antisocial behaviour and abuse, shops and pubs shut down and police threw all their resources at the area.

"We are all very concerned here about where the Dale Farm travellers will go," said John Clark, chairman of Stisted Parish Council, whose area has just won Essex Village of the Year.

"All rural communities in Essex are worried about them arriving en masse on their doorsteps."

"We have had concerns raised by our residents, as we already have three traveller sites in the area – one authorised, one tolerated, and one unauthorised."

"You get antisocial behaviour, dumping in ditches, hare coursing."

Eighty-six gypsy families at Dale Farm have 21 days to quit the unauthorised site, where they live on green belt land without planning permission.

But there are fears the evictions will cause problems elsewhere as Essex does not have enough authorised sites to house them.

Essex is in the top three counties in the UK in terms of gypsy population, with 1,142 gypsy caravans, but 345 are parked on unauthorised sites.

"There are not enough authorised sites," said Witham MP Priti Patel, who raised the matter in a Parliamentary debate this week.

"If travellers had authorised sites they wouldn't need illegal sites. I know they are travelling but they do want to bed down somewhere and I don't think the current system is sustainable. Another concern is that it's public money being used for the evictions."

Basildon Council has set aside £8 million of taxpayers' cash for the planned eviction, and Essex Police have earmarked the same amount.

Mrs Patel went on to say gypsies regularly get away with breaking the laws that shackle the settled community, claiming the playing field is unbalanced.

"I am inundated with messages from very, very concerned residents," she said. "Gypsies just pitch up, without any approval for planning permission."

"The settled community could not build without planning permission, but gypsies appeal on human rights grounds."

"Legislation puts the human rights of the gypsies above the human rights of our settled community, and people are upset."

"What is needed is a change in the planning system to ensure that the wishes of local communities are respected and that the system treats everyone equally."

Grattan Puxon, a gypsy spokesman and Dale Farm campaigner from Colchester, said the travellers would meet the rehousing costs privately.

"Planning permission is very difficult," he said.

"And we always get moved on under the Criminal Justice Act."

"Essex has one of the biggest needs for authorised traveller sites in the country, but there aren't nearly enough sites."

"People at Dale Farm don't want to leave and they are generally very desperate because this is a terrible threat which has been hanging over them for a number of years."

"Several of the residents are simply not well enough to go out on the road; it's like a death sentence for them."

"People are certainly not leaving, though. They are determined to fight it out."

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Recommendations

